

Madonna del Sasso School Alumni Newsletter



Investing in Our Campus: Recent Improvements at Madonna del Sasso School

Madonna del Sasso School continues to make meaningful investments in its campus to ensure a safe, welcoming, and inspiring environment for students, staff, and families. Over the past year, several important structural and aesthetic improvements have been completed, with more enhancements planned in the months ahead.

One of the most significant updates has been the replacement of carpeting and flooring in many classrooms. These spaces now feature cleaner, more durable surfaces that better support daily learning and activity. Plans are already underway to complete the remaining rooms later this year, continuing this important campus-wide improvement.

The entire school has also been freshly repainted, creating a bright and cohesive look across campus. The updated white and deep blue color palette provides a clean, modern appearance that enhances classrooms, hallways, and common areas.

Safety and functionality have also been a key focus. The Student Activity Center now features new doors, improving both security and ease of use for school events and student programs. Additionally, many other doors were replaced throughout campus, fortifying these spaces. On the playground, a new, taller, and safer fence has been installed to better protect students during outdoor play.

Last year, the school also completed several major improvements to athletic and staff spaces. The gymnasium was upgraded with new LED lighting, providing better visibility, energy efficiency, and a brighter atmosphere for physical education classes and events. Additionally, the gym floor and staff workroom floors were renovated, featuring more durable materials and a refreshed design in Madonna-themed blue and yellow—enhancing both functionality and school pride.

These upgrades reflect Madonna del Sasso School's ongoing commitment to maintaining a campus that supports learning, safety, and community. Thanks to the generosity of our supporters and families, the school continues to preserve its legacy while investing thoughtfully in the future.

We are grateful to our school community for helping Madonna del Sasso remain a place where students can thrive—today and for generations to come!

In Loving Memory of Violet “Mrs. B” Bernard

1926–2025

Madonna del Sasso School lovingly remembers Violet Bernard, affectionately known to generations as “Mrs. B,” whose life of service, faith, and joy left an indelible mark on our school and parish community.

Born in Oakland in 1926, Violet spent part of her childhood in Hawaii before returning to Gonzales, California, at age 11. After graduating from Gonzales High School, she married her husband, Robert Bernard, who served in the military. Her connection to Madonna del Sasso began humbly—volunteering at the original one-room school located at the Portuguese Hall—yet it quickly became a lifelong calling.

Mrs. B stepped in wherever she was needed. She volunteered in migrant education programs, welcomed children into her home, assisted in classrooms, taught music, and supported families by providing uniforms, meals, and tutoring. Wanting to serve the school even more fully, she earned her teaching degree from San José State University, launching a remarkable career in education.

Over 30 years at Madonna del Sasso and 41 years total in education, Mrs. B taught primarily second and fifth grade, led First Communion, helped develop the school’s physical education program, founded interschool athletic league play, and even served as the school nurse. She eventually became Vice Principal, working closely with Sister Barbara. She retired in 1987 to care for her husband, but never truly stepped away from the Madonna community.

Together, Violet and Robert treated Madonna del Sasso as a second home—maintaining the grounds, caring for the Mary statue, supporting church events, and quietly doing whatever was needed, even mowing lawns or cleaning bathrooms. Mrs. B poured her heart into



Violet “Mrs. B.” Bernard

Christmas programs, sewing costumes and creating unforgettable performances, including one beloved production where she played Little Bo Peep, unveiling children dressed as sheep from beneath a giant handmade hoop skirt.

Her love of music, devotion to Mary, and joy in teaching were ever-present. Inspired by her childhood in Hawaii, she taught students how to hula dance, and she was rarely without Snoopy by her side in the classroom. A passionate athlete, she believed deeply in physical fitness and wellness for children. She also initiated the Blessing of the Animals/Anointing of the Pets, a tradition that continues to this day.

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Violet “Mrs. B.” Bernard

Perhaps most telling of Mrs. B’s impact was how she measured her success: by the success of her students. She kept an extensive doll collection—hundreds of dolls—each named after a former student, each with a story she could lovingly recount. She remained connected to former students and friends well into her later years, even staying active on Facebook until age 99.

Madonna del Sasso was truly a family legacy for Violet Bernard. Her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchild all attended the school she served so faithfully. As shared by her daughter Yvonne DaSilva and granddaughter Nadine DaSilva, Mrs. B’s life was defined by joyful service, deep faith, and boundless love for children.

Her presence will be deeply missed, but her spirit lives on in our traditions, our campus, and in the countless lives she shaped. Madonna del Sasso is better because Violet “Mrs. B” Bernard was part of its story.



Celebrating Catholic Schools Week!

Our students joyfully celebrated Catholic Schools Week from January 26-30th with a fun-filled lineup of activities that highlighted faith, community, and school spirit. Throughout the week, students participated in festive dress-up days, showing creativity and enthusiasm while celebrating what makes our school special. Laughter and excitement filled the air as students enjoyed popcorn, face painting, and class and school-wide games, giving everyone a chance to relax, connect, and celebrate together. These moments of fun strengthened friendships and reminded us of the joy found in our shared community.

A highlight of the week was a visit from Father Carlos, who spoke to students about vocations. His message encouraged students to reflect on how God calls each of us to serve others in different ways, planting seeds of faith and purpose that will continue to grow. Catholic Schools Week was a beautiful reminder of the strong faith, joyful learning, and sense of family that make our school such a special place.



Growing Faith, Learning, and Community:

The Madonna del Sasso School Garden Project

Madonna del Sasso School is excited to share a transformative new initiative that is bringing new life, and new purpose, to several underutilized areas of our campus. Through the Madonna del Sasso Garden Project, we are revitalizing three dilapidated garden spaces into vibrant, meaningful environments where students can learn, reflect, and grow.

The first garden is located next to the shed that is currently being renovated into “Alumni Hall,” a new multipurpose classroom space. This area will become a Prayer Garden, centered around a statue of Mary and filled with a variety of flowers designed to inspire peace and reflection. The garden will also include plants that attract hummingbirds, comfortable benches for students, and quiet spaces for relaxation, regeneration, and prayer.

This special garden will be lovingly maintained by the 3rd grade class, with support from their 7th grade “older buddies,” fostering mentorship and shared responsibility. Teachers will be able to bring students to the prayer garden for religion class, science lessons, or simply as a calm place to work and reflect.

The second garden will be developed in the space behind the 2nd and 3rd grade classrooms and will serve as a mostly edible plants garden. This area will feature raised garden beds, an outdoor classroom, composting and worm farming systems, and a sunflower garden dedicated in honor of Sister Barbara, celebrating her admiration for St. Julie Billiart.

While the 2nd grade students will take the lead in maintaining this space, the garden will be open to all classes for hands-on learning and exploration. Students will harvest the produce they grow and host a student-run farmers



market, selling items to school families and reinvesting the proceeds back into the garden, learning entrepreneurship, sustainability, and ecological protection along the way.

The third garden is being created in the preschool area, giving our youngest students early exposure to environmental stewardship. This space will help preschoolers begin learning where food comes from and how to care for the earth in age-appropriate, meaningful ways.

Although all three spaces began as neglected areas, our school community has already shown incredible commitment to the project. Parents have participated in multiple campus clean-up days, helping prepare the spaces for cultivation and transformation. The project is being guided by lead parent Jaclyn Bennett, who brings expert knowledge and leadership to the effort. Jaclyn holds a degree in Horticulture from California State Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo and currently works in the agriculture industry. Her scientific expertise is ensuring that the gardens are thoughtfully designed for long-term success.

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Funding for the project is coming from a combination of grants and donations. The 7th grade class has embraced the garden as a service initiative, hosting a craft shop featuring their own creations to fundraise for garden essentials. The school has also launched a donor and sponsorship website, allowing supporters to directly fund specific items needed for the gardens.

If you are interested in donating or sponsoring a piece of this meaningful project, we invite you to visit: <https://mdsgarden.auctria.events>

Through these gardens, Madonna del Sasso School is cultivating far more than plants—we are nurturing faith, responsibility, curiosity, and community. We are grateful to our alumni and supporters for helping us grow a legacy that will benefit students for generations to come.

The QR code below will also take you to the garden project website:



Site of the future MDS prayer garden



Cultivating a School Year Rooted in Faith: *Celebrating Chapel Mass with Father David*

At Madonna del Sasso, faith formation is nurtured through individualized Chapel Masses, where each class celebrates Mass in an intimate setting with just their classmates.

Recently, our fourth graders enjoyed a Mass with Father David, designed for their age and understanding. This personalized approach helps students reflect more deeply, ask questions, and connect meaningfully to their faith.

Class-specific Masses like these enrich our students' spiritual growth and embody Madonna del Sasso's commitment to fostering faith in every child.



4th Grade Class with Father David after Mass

Crusader Spotlight: Tricia Smoot-Devlin

Class of 1965, Teacher, Lifelong MDS Community Member

For Tricia (Tognietti) Smoot-Devlin, Madonna del Sasso School has never been just a school—it has been a lifelong home.

Tricia was part of the very first class to attend Madonna del Sasso School when the building opened. Beginning in second grade, she graduated from Madonna in 1965 at a time when the campus looked very different. There was no dedicated eighth grade classroom, so students met in the kitchen, and the student activity center was the church itself. Sacraments, Mass, and celebrations all took place there, reinforcing the deep connection between faith and learning that defined the school.

Madonna del Sasso was all Tricia ever knew. She attended Catholic school her entire life and remembers a small, close-knit community where everyone knew one another. Students walked or rode their bikes to school, rain or shine, and parents were deeply involved, not only in school life but in socializing together beyond the classroom. Faith was central, with traditions such as Stations of the Cross, May Crowning, and even dressing as patron saints for Halloween, complete with student presentations. Most teachers were nuns, and many stayed for years, creating continuity, stability, and a strong sense of family.

Tricia continued her Catholic education at Notre Dame High School before attending San Diego State University. After exploring careers in the food and restaurant industry, she felt called to education. She taught Restaurant Careers in the Regional Occupational Program (ROP) at Salinas Union High School District, then earned her elementary teaching credential through the Cal State Teach program. Her passion for learning led her to Azusa Pacific University, where she earned her Library Media credential, working as a Library



Tricia's class learning science in the garden

Media Teacher at Alvarez High School and later teaching second and third grade in the San Jose Unified School District.

In 2011, Tricia returned to Madonna del Sasso—this time as a third grade teacher. From the beginning, she felt supported by a powerful message from the principal: parents are the first educators. This philosophy shaped her teaching and strengthened her partnership with families. She valued the consistent communication, strong parent involvement, and sense of community that allowed students to be challenged, supported, and encouraged to grow.

During her time at Madonna, Tricia was known for her strong classroom management, rigorous curriculum, and creative teaching. She incorporated hands-on projects, field trips, and local history into her lessons and served on the accreditation committee, helping to write the school's accreditation report. Her love of teaching and Catholic tradition deepened her own faith as she guided students in participating in Mass, choir, and service.

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One of Tricia's most lasting contributions was the school garden. Inspired by third grade standards and a desire for experiential learning, she began growing pumpkins in the kindergarten garden and dreamed of expanding the program. She built planter boxes at home to test her ideas, wrote and won grants for tools and supplies, and, with the help of engaged parents, created a functional school garden. Every student had their own space to plant, nurture, and harvest. Watching students bring home their plants and take pride in their work was one of her greatest joys. Compost bins donated by a parent and actively used by students further reinforced lessons in stewardship and responsibility.

Tricia retired from Madonna del Sasso School in 2017, after years of dedication. Her commitment to academic excellence, tradition, and community left a lasting imprint on the school.

Adding to her deep connection, Tricia received all her first Sacraments including Confirmation in the Madonna Student Activities Center (SAC). She was also married at Madonna del Sasso Church—truly making her involvement with Madonna a lifelong journey.

From student to teacher to alumna whose legacy still grows—quite literally—in the new school garden project, Tricia Smoot-Devlin embodies the spirit, faith, and community of Madonna del Sasso School.



2025/2026 Science Fair finalists

Academic Growth and Excellence at Madonna del Sasso School

Madonna del Sasso School continues to honor its tradition of academic excellence by engaging students in meaningful competition and intentional growth. This year, sixth through eighth grade students participated in the Scripps National Spelling Bee, advancing from classroom competitions to a school-wide final. One student earned the title of school champion and will represent Madonna del Sasso at the Monterey County Spelling Bee, with the opportunity to advance to the national competition in Washington, D.C. Middle school students also showcased strong critical thinking skills during the Science Fair, applying the scientific process to explore complex ideas. Top projects advanced to the county level, reflecting a high caliber of student work.

In addition, Madonna del Sasso introduced a standardized writing assessment for grades three through eight, developed by Catherine Rowe, Director of Curriculum. Administered three times a year, the assessment aligns with California State Standards and provides valuable feedback for teachers and students through individualized writing conferences and intervention activities. A new writing enrichment initiative, the MDS Let's Write Program, will launch in February 2026 to further support student growth. Together, these initiatives reflect Madonna del Sasso's ongoing commitment to academic excellence—one that continues to prepare students for success while honoring the school's proud educational legacy.

Have a Crusader memory
you'd like to share?
Email crowe@mdsschool.com



Rooted in Faith, United in Tradition:

December Celebrations at Madonna del Sasso School

December at Madonna del Sasso is a time when faith, culture, and community beautifully come together. Two beloved traditions, the celebration of the Our Lady of Guadalupe Mass and Las Posadas, once again filled our campus with reverence, joy, and festive spirit. These annual liturgical celebrations continue to be meaningful experiences for our students, faculty, and staff, reminding us of the rich traditions of our Catholic faith.

The celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe brought the entire school together in worship and learning. A highlight of the Mass was a moving reenactment performed by our 4th grade students, who portrayed the story of St. Juan Diego and the miracle of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Their performance helped bring this important moment in Church history to life for the whole school community. Adding to the beauty of the Mass, a mariachi band provided joyful and authentic music throughout the liturgy. Students were invited to dress up in celebration of the feast day, filling the church with joy and school-wide unity.

Guitar Class students leading Las Posadas processions on MDS campus

Later in the month, students jubilantly participated in the traditional Las Posadas celebration. Father Greg led the event, guiding students through this meaningful reenactment of Mary and Joseph's search for shelter. Music for the procession was provided by Mrs. Gomez's middle school guitar class, whose talents enhanced the experience as students traveled from classroom to classroom singing traditional songs. The celebration concluded with a lively and much-anticipated piñata, bringing smiles and laughter to all who participated. Students also embraced the festive spirit by wearing holiday attire inspired by the Student Council's spirit dress themes for the week.

These December liturgical celebrations are treasured traditions at Madonna del Sasso School. They not only deepen our students'



4th Graders' Our Lady of Guadalupe reenactment

understanding of faith and culture, but also strengthen the sense of community that continues to unite alumni, families, and friends of our school.

Alumni Spotlight: Mattzilla Duron, Class of 1996

From Classroom Creativity to Big Screen Magic

Mattzilla Duron, formerly known as Matthew, has been creatively carving his path in the film and television industry ever since his days at Madonna del Sasso School. Mattzilla's journey began in Kindergarten in 1987, where he followed in the footsteps of his family—both his dad and sister attended Madonna.

From an early age, Mattzilla was surrounded by teachers and administrators who recognized and encouraged his artistic talents, allowing his passion for art and his creativity to flourish. He fondly remembers Sister Barbara and Dr. White, who both served as principal during his time at Madonna, and reflected on how they guided students with an impactful, nurturing spirit. With this supportive leadership in place, creative opportunities abounded, like the time Dr. White allowed him to produce a movie for a class project instead of writing an essay—a sequel to *Jurassic Park* in 1994. Mattzilla highlighted that for many of his class assignments, he was given an opportunity to produce films. These creative and varied learning options that were provided by his Madonna del Sasso School teachers and principals acted as a springboard for Mattzilla's talent in art and film to take flight.

Mattzilla also reminisced on influential memories at Madonna—ones that truly made it feel like a community where he was able to learn, grow, and thrive. He loved reading aloud at Mass, participating in talent shows, enjoying the Madonna spaghetti dinners, and taking part in the beloved Halloween carnivals. One memorable year, after someone took his candy, Sister Barbara ensured he didn't miss out, providing a bag from the office so he could trick-or-treat.



Award winning film artist, Mattzilla Duron

“Madonna was wonderful for me. The instructors nurtured my creativity, which ultimately led me to my career. I am grateful for the support and encouragement I received—it shaped who I am today.”

This demonstration of care, compassion, and focus on each student's needs truly made Madonna a special place for Mattzilla and others.

Mattzilla graduated from Madonna in 1996, and continued on to attend Everett Alvarez High School as a part of its first graduating class. His experiences at Madonna left a lasting impression, and he still remains close with many of his classmates today.

After high school, Mattzilla pursued his artistic passions in art school in San Francisco, earning a degree in Media Arts and Animation. Through his education, he learned critical skills in 3D animation. He also shared his talents with the community, designing a sculpture class that taught others how to create stop motion.

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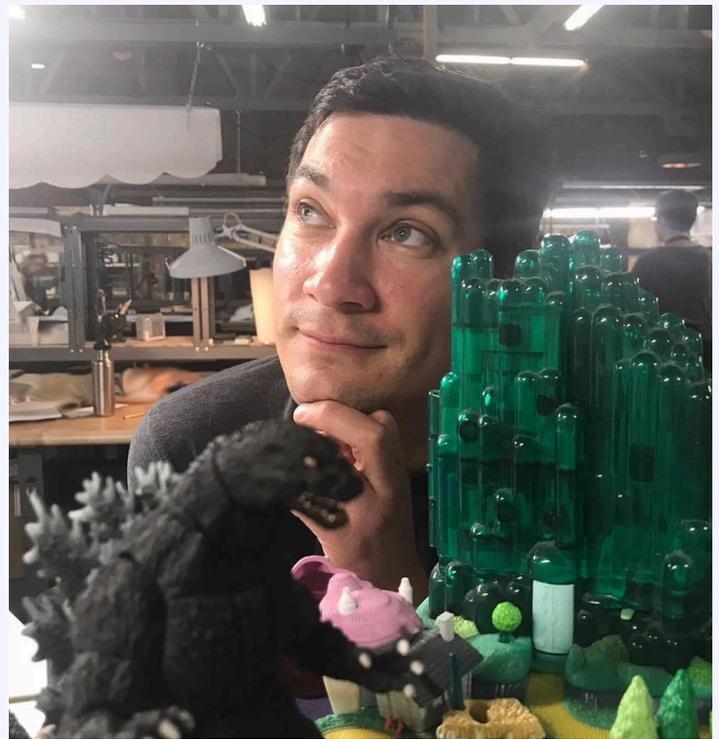
Mattzilla continued to diversify his skills and to expand his network, working as a make up artist, in special effects, and as a puppet designer for a variety of projects. He grew his portfolio with hard work, dedication, and his own creativity, driven by the goal to break into the highly competitive film industry.

Mattzilla employed inspiring, unstoppable perseverance, applying for jobs seeking unique experience in molds, a skill set he possessed. His breakthrough came when he was hired for the 2009 stop motion film, *Coraline*, which went on to be nominated in 2010 for both an Academy Award and Golden Globe Award for Best Animated Feature Film of the Year. This experience led him to work at Laika Studios on other notable projects such as *The Box Trolls*, *Kubo and the Two Strings*, and *Missing Link*. He later contributed as a puppet fabricator on Guillermo del Toro's 2022 film, *Pinocchio*, which won an Academy Award! Today, he continues his career at Shadow Machine, working on projects like *The Tiny Chef Show* and *In the Know*.

Specializing in mold making, Mattzilla transforms designers' concepts into puppets and characters for stop motion animation. From developing molds to creating creatures for upcoming films and shows, his work continues to blend artistry with technical mastery.

Reflecting on his time at Madonna del Sasso, Mattzilla says, "Madonna was wonderful for me. The instructors nurtured my creativity, which ultimately led me to my career. I am grateful for the support and encouragement I received-it shaped who I am today."

From a curious Kindergartner to a renowned artist in stop motion animation, Mattzilla Duron's journey is a testament to the power of creativity, dedication, and the lasting influence of a nurturing school community.



ART IN ACTION!

Madonna del Sasso School recently hosted a special pop-up art showcase, celebrating the creativity and artistic growth of our students. Throughout the first half of the year, students thoughtfully collected their artwork in personal portfolios under the guidance of professional artist and MDS art teacher Jess Ansberry.

As part of the process, students reflected on their work and selected a favorite piece to display, encouraging self-assessment, confidence, and pride in their artistic journey. The chosen pieces were showcased in the Student Activity Center, where classmates and families had the opportunity to view and enjoy the wide range of talent and creativity on display.

The art showcase highlights Madonna del Sasso School's commitment to incorporating the visual arts into our curriculum. By valuing artistic expression alongside academics, MDS continues to support the development of the whole child and provide a rich, well-rounded educational experience for our learners.

Are You an MDS Alum?

We'd love to hear your story! Whether you're near or far, teaching or traveling, let us know where life has taken you after Madonna del Sasso. Email us at crowe@mdsschool.com to be featured

in an upcoming edition!

MDS Service Initiative

From Campus to Community

Madonna del Sasso's new Service Initiative Program is already making a meaningful impact in the community. Our students are learning the power of service while developing leadership, creativity, and compassion.

This year, 8th graders led a full month of Pinktober events to raise funds for the Breast Cancer Assistance Group (BCAG), including a craft shop, face painting, free dress days, and Hearts for Hope, where students sold paper hearts to decorate a giant sign of encouraging messages. In November, they partnered with BCAG again, making Christmas cards in English and Spanish for distribution to the women they support.

7th graders have focused on environmental service with activities like cleaning the MDS campus. Students also went on a service field trip where they removed invasive plant species at the Santa Lucia Preserve in Carmel Valley. They returned inspired to educate others through presentations and awareness campaigns. This group is also running a January/February fundraiser for the school gardens, including craft sales, free dress days, and an Applebee's breakfast fundraiser.

Separately, 3rd graders have been spreading joy to the community by creating succulent flower gifts and cards for a residents at a local assisted living home.

In addition, our 6th graders hosted a Christmas gift drive for Catholic Charities, collecting and organizing over 300 gifts for children and seniors, while 5th and 6th graders made handmade Christmas cards for gift recipients. Later this year, 7th and 2nd graders will partner with the Alliance on Aging to create Mother's Day and Father's Day cards for local seniors.

These projects reflect the heart of the Service Initiative—giving students opportunities to make a real difference in their community. With many more projects planned, the program is off to an amazing start!



The MDS 8th Grade Class BCAG Hearts for Hope

Boots, Brews, and Big Hearts: A Successful Benefit for MDS

Madonna del Sasso School's Fall Benefit, Boots and Brews, was a tremendous success and an unforgettable evening for our school community. Held on October 10, 2025, in Cross Hall, the event sold out completely, welcoming nearly 300 guests for a night of celebration, generosity, and fun.

Attendees enjoyed an energetic atmosphere featuring a live country band and a professional DJ, MDS middle school teacher Mr. Ubaldo, who kept the crowd on the dance floor all night long. Guests were treated to a delicious dinner, along with exciting live and silent auctions and multiple raffles throughout the evening.

One of the most anticipated moments of the night was the 50/50 raffle, with one lucky winner taking home an incredible \$13,000.

Thanks to the support of 37 sponsors and the generosity of attendees, the event raised an impressive \$73,000 in support of Madonna del Sasso School. These funds will directly benefit our students and programs, helping to strengthen the school for years to come.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to all of the alumni who attended, sponsored, donated, and supported Boots and Brews. Your continued involvement and generosity make events like this possible and ensure the ongoing success of Madonna del Sasso School.

Remember When...

Through the Years at MDS

Take a trip down memory lane with these throwback photos from Madonna del Sasso! From classroom moments and school events to friendships that lasted a lifetime, these memories are a special part of what makes the MDS community so meaningful.

Do you have a “remember when” story of your own? We’d love to hear it! Whether it’s a favorite teacher, a memorable tradition, or a moment that still makes you smile, please send in your reflections or photos to be featured in future alumni newsletters.

Because at Madonna del Sasso, the memories don’t fade—they connect us across generations.



Madonna Memories

Share your favorite memory to be featured in a future edition!

Email
crowe@mdsschool.com

